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Review of TIMOTHY S. LANIAK, Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther

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TIMOTHY S. LANIAK, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (SBL Dissertation Series 165). Scholars Press, Atlanta 1998. Pp. xiii + 205. Price: $34.95 hardback. ISBN: 0-7885-0505-X.

This book, a study of the anthropological categories of "shame" and "honour" in the Book of Esther, represents an excellent new contribution to the field of Esther studies. It is new because, as Laniak observes, the significance of the categories of "honour" and "shame" have diminished in the modern west (p. 1), and contemporary readers of the Book of Esther may be unaware of the operation of these categories on the plot and characters of the book. Laniak's book, a basically unrevised form of his 1997 Harvard Divinity School dissertation, sheds important light on this neglected aspect of the Book of Esther.

Laniak begins in the Introduction by discerning a pattern in Hebrew literature involving the categories of honour and shame which, he claims, cuts across the traditional literary genres in the Hebrew Bible. This pattern, which he calls the "Challenge and Honor" pattern, consists of four movements: 1. Honour granted; 2. Honour challenged; 3. Honour vindicated; 4. Honour enhanced (p. 12). Laniak sees this pattern in the stories of Job, David, Nehemiah, Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Esther, Judith and Susanna. Although Laniak argues that this pattern transcends genre boundaries, it is clearly a pattern closely related to the Royal Courtier Tale, and seems to be most frequent in Wisdom writings and novellas of the exilic and post-exilic periods. As such it is appropriately applied to the Book of Esther. Laniak arranges his book so that each of the four chapters following the Introduction corresponds to one movement of the pattern. Chapter 1, which discusses Esther 1–2, corresponds to Honour granted; chapter 2 (Esther 3-5) to Honour challenged; chapter 3 (Esther 6–7) to Honour vindicated; and chapter 4 (Esther 8–10) to Honour enhanced. A short conclusion rounds off the study.

Although Laniak does not give ironclad definitions for "honour' and "shame' preferring to leave the definitions elastic and multivalent' (pp. 24-32), it is dear from his discussion that honour is a term applied to a male's public standing having to do with substance (wealth, power), status and reputation. "Shame' refers to actions or circumstances that strip away honour, and again is a public category. A man may shame himself, or be shamed by his subordinates (wife, children, servants, etc.) Laniak does a thorough analysis of the Book of Esther, showing how the categories of honour and shame effect the behaviour of the characters in the story. His insights are usually sound and his analysis excellent, although I found myself disagreeing with him at minor points. For example, in Laniak's analysis of Esther 1 he notes that King Ahasuerus is honouring himself by the series of banquets he gives, by displaying his substance and status and thus increasing his reputation. Vashti's refusal to appear before the company brings public shame on the king and must be dealt with accordingly. Therefore, Laniak sees the response of the king and his advisors, banishing Vashti and sending out a royal edict decreeing that every woman should honour her husband (1:19–20), not as an example of the author's humour (as some commentators, including this author, have done), but as an appropriate response to the enormity ofVashti's shaming action. While I think that Laniak has demonstrated the importance of the categories of honour and shame in this episode, I believe he is taking the text too seriously and is thus missing the author's ironic humour. If Ahasuerus were truly honourable, then Vashti would not have so readily shamed him. In the author's eyes, Ahasuerus is no more worthy of true honour than is Vashti; it is the Jews (represented by Esther and Mordecai) who, although completely absent from the honour-grabbing scene in chapter one, will emerge as the most honour-worthy in chapter 10.

Laniak's study contains several interesting small sections on the relevance of the categories of honour and shame to such disparate subjects as gender, clothing, warfare and mourning rituals. For example, in the section on clothing (pp. 116–21) he notes that all the incidents efface covering arc incidents of shaming. His discussion is also helpful for resolving certain interpretative issues, e.g. when Hannah's ten sons are impaled on the gallows in chapter 9, Laniak notes that the death of Haman's sons completes the dismantling of Hainan's honour, since substance also includes progeny (p. 128; Job's honour is likewise restored when he has new children to replace the ones who died). The idea of sons being only appendages to the father and thus part of his honour is foreign to contemporary readers, but is part of the world of the text.

There is very little to criticize in this book, aside from a number of typographical errors and a slight problem with font sizes, which results in an overly large final *nun* in some Hebrew words. One issue that Laniak avoids tackling head-on is the issue of the absence of any mention of God, religion or Jewish law in the text. He states that the author assumes the "implicitly acknowledged involvement of God in MT Esther" (p. 169, n. 2) but he does not really grapple with the fact that God is never mentioned once, an absence so strange that the LXX translation carefully corrects it. However, this might be a topic for a later study. This excellent work belongs on the shelf of every Esther scholar, and should make a lasting contribution to the field.

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